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Clinton's Education Plan: Politics, Not Solutions

The 'Era of Big Government': *It's Ba-aack!*

In his 1996 State of the Union address, Bill Clinton declared the "era of big government" to be over. But Tuesday night, with characteristic shamelessness, he forgot his earlier pronouncement and outlined a host of new programs that will easily approach *half a trillion dollars* in new spending. In this renewed era of bigger government, Bill Clinton threatens to close his term as "the last headache of the 20th century," not as some nonexistent bridge to the 21st.

Two years ago Clinton tried to give us government-run socialized medicine. This year, he sets the course for socialized education. Here's a quick look at some of the Clinton proposals in the area of education. They expose the politics of this president putting **Big Spending** and **Big Government** ahead of solutions that put students' and parents' interests first. However, on a few other fronts, we're happy to see the President come around to our way of thinking.

Hey, Big Spender!

- ▶ **The President wants to "build or modernize 5,000 schools"** — A 68-year-old federal wage law, known as the Davis-Bacon Act, places an unfunded federal mandate on states and localities by forcing them, when building or re-building schools, for example, to pay an inflationary wage rate that significantly increases the construction costs. This law's arbitrary and outdated work rules and classifications cost more to provide less: one study shows the average per-classroom cost is 13 percent lower for the 20 states that do not impose their own prevailing wage restrictions. If the remaining states lifted their wage restriction mandates, localities would have an additional \$239 million for school spending, equaling more than \$8.5 million per state. Would the President agree to eliminating the onerous federal Davis-Bacon law?
- ▶ **Clinton wants to "turn around the worst-performing schools or shut them down"** — Who should decide what schools to shut down, Washington bureaucrats, or parents and administrators who have the most at stake? Meanwhile, the federal government provides

only 7 percent of local school funding but demands 50 percent of all school paperwork. This paperwork burden requires nearly 49 million hours each year or the equivalent of 25,000 employees working full-time on paper, instead of teaching kids. The best way to restore academic excellence is to make sure that schoolhouses spend more time on academic excellence, and less on federal mandates.

- ▶ **He wants 100,000 new teachers** — Just last year, Congress obligated \$1.2 billion for new teachers. Will this new money actually go to teachers — or to overhead? Over the last 30 years, the vast majority of education investment has gone to administrators and support staff, and not to teachers reaching our nation's students. In some schools, bureaucrats outnumber teachers. Republicans recognize that individual classrooms have individual needs. Shouldn't localities be given the flexibility to invest either in teachers or textbooks, if that is what they need?
- ▶ **The President wants to "increase summer and after-school programs"** — This 300-percent increase in federal spending only expands the failed status quo. Instead, Republicans say we should support efforts to assure quality teachers and competitive standards of excellence.
- ▶ **He asked for \$45 million in scholarships for students who commit to teach in underserved, needy communities** — This amount results in a 600-percent increase over last year's amount. We seem to have a new adage in budgeting: if we have a surplus, he (the President) will spend it.

Big Brother, Big-Bad Government

- ▶ **He renewed his calls for national testing** — Despite two years in which Congress rejected national testing for students outright, the President persists in his call for just such tests. Nationally, schools already participate in the Third International Mathematics and Science Survey (TIMSS) as well as the National Assessment of Education Progress test. Along with these two national tests, 45 states already have statewide testing programs. What will another round of federalized tests accomplish? If testing were the academic solution, wouldn't we would already have "A+" students?

More troubling, does President Clinton have in mind a test that is more about establishing a national curriculum than achieving higher academic standards? National tests based strictly on a "dumbed-down," one-size-fits-all curriculum might well result in higher test scores across the board, but they would not produce any improvement in academic achievement.

The President said that we must "support what works and to stop supporting what does not work." National testing does not work. Republicans want to invest in what does.

Thanks for Stealing Our Ideas

- ▶ **The President joins our call for “ending social promotion”** — More than ever, education has and will continue to become the primary ticket for future economic success, and so ending social promotion (that is, when students are promoted to the next grade even when they’ve not mastered the skills for their current grade) has long been a goal of conservatives. But, Republicans are concerned with the issue of who would make the critical decisions about who shall be denied promotion — would it be those closest to the situation, or Washington bureaucrats?
- ▶ **Report cards on every school** — While accountability is widely welcomed by Republicans, we do not believe in unfunded mandates that require states to shift focus from state and local concerns. States and localities should be able to give parents the information they want, not what Washington bureaucrats demand.
- ▶ **Empowering parents with greater choice** — While the President has finally caught on to the value of charter schools, his proposal for 3,000 charter schools is too little too late. Perhaps he would be willing to re-charter *all* our nation's public schools!
- ▶ **Sensible discipline policies** — When drugs and violence threaten the classroom, the first victim is learning. Republicans believe that every child should be challenged to learn — not challenged to survive. While uniforms and curfews sometimes work, parents must be permitted to play a large role in assuring safety and discipline in their own children's schools.
- ▶ **Teacher quality and excellence** — Republicans know that other than our nation's parents, no other intervention equals the effect on children's learning than that of a knowledgeable, skillful teacher. We welcome the President's support in helping localities and states assure that all new teachers pass basic performance exams and that all teachers are fully qualified in their subject of teaching. Additionally, we invite the President to join us in rewarding schools and teachers who increase student performance.

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